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Sentient Garden

I spent two and half years writing Why We Garden: Cultivating a Sense of Place. *Although my earlier books explored the same issue of recognizing nature as a sentient ally, I found that only certain people responded to my metaphors of dolphins, whales, and even ecology. But everybody lives somewhere. And huge numbers of people already relate to their own garden as a way to reconnect with the Earth. That's vaguely what this new book is about. It will be published in May by Henry Holt in the US and Kousakusha in Tokyo. The excerpt below speaks about interspecies communion.*

The more I learn about my garden, the less objective I feel about it. Now that I can rattle off the Latin names and vital needs of so many of my own landscape plants, you might think I would regard them as botanical specimens, each possessed of a unique genetic recipe and species-specific traits. Call me sentimental: I think of them as friends.

I'm no expert; not a professional gardener, and certainly not a botanist. I learned in the ninth grade that science mandates an emotional separation be maintained between observer and observed. If so, then what I do is not science. I can be a keen observer, but not always an objective one. I treat gardening as a cooperative affair. I rather feel like a part of a neighborhood in which plants, animals, dirt, rocks and a human family all participate collectively in a love affair with place.

Neither the language nor the forthright pragmatism of horticulture is able to plumb the depths of what I consider to be a mostly unspoken, intuitive relationship with the garden. My mind treats its own growing stockpile of horticultural information—not as the basis of gardening—but rather as a background hum to the experiental impulses of digging, smelling, enjoying. This confession also explains a hunch of mine: that the sentient garden is best explained in the first person. I believe the instincts that apprehend it turn tentative when clothed in the garb of dispassionate observation. There isn't much objective to it, so why obfuscate its many insubstantial traits by falling upon a scientific jargon that does no better than transmute pure delight into an objective posture. We are all heirs to this jargon; the innocent children of the reductionist idiom it represents.

It causes me to pity the gardener who peers into the sentient garden and perceives nothing but solid resources exhibited to the senses through a media of biological processes bound up in laws of causation and ticking away with the precision of a machine possessed of molecular tolerances. Look again. See that ornamental plum tree over there? That one's a warrior. A survivor. An interspecies communicator. Or look at these cabbages. They are the gift-givers. Sentient beings possessed of a shy and humble integrity.

Many of us read such descriptive prose, and our education immediately puts up a stop sign to keep our senses from proceeding any further down this garden path. We might conclude that such descriptions smack of too vivid an imagination. No, I protest! Look again. Look differently. Refocus your eyes on the spaces between the imagination and the resource. There! See the cabbages? The plum tree? The sentient garden is beckoning to us.

This is hardly a game. I sometimes believe that acknowledging a consciousness and a conscience within nature holds the last best hope for a humanity bent on destroying this fair earth. But that is a very large idea. We do better to start this walk down the path of the sentient garden by avoiding grand conclusions. Let us commence this walk by conversing about humble experiences. But let's not be

too timid to indulge ourselves in personal hunches. As we wander the sentient garden chatting about the personality of plum trees and the shy integrity of cabbages, realize that scientific terms like *species-specific characteristics* and *genetic makeup* tell us nothing about how we might connect with the plants. As a laymen, I consider all such terms to be official language–words best reserved for people primarily bent on distancing themselves from their subjects as well as from their own emotional point of view. In my case, plant personalities is what I say. Personalities is what makes sense.

Several years ago I planted two ornamental hawthorns, two pears, a peach, a blireana ornamental plum, and a prune-plum; all strung out in a skewed line along a deer path leading from the edge of a fir forest. Despite the well-known ability of deer to leap six feet over a barrier to get at fruit saplings–and which ordinarily leads all the gardeners hereabouts to stringing a six or eight foot-tall fence around the young trees–I remained a stubborn aesthete. Not a chicken wire fence in sight.

Over the years, the deer arrive to browse my property during the latter half of the winter when the wild browse is at a mininum. I notice that they avoid the hawthorns and the blireana plum which are right on their path. They usually grab no more than a nibble at the leaves of the pear trees before moving on. They show no interest whatsoever in the peaches. Yet they would have destroyed the prune-plum years ago if I hadn't initiated a campaign to prune off all the lower branches and then circled the trunk with a fence. I strung up a thirty-inch tall barrier of chicken wire just inches from the tree trunk and held up by a single bamboo stick.

I call it my *ideogram fence*, because it reminds me of one of those characters in the Chinese alphabet that represents an object or an idea rather than a phonetic sound. More than a fence itself, this chicken wire and bamboo stick sculpture *represents* a fence. Any deer could break through it in a second if so motivated. My ideogram fence seems to work far better than no fence at all, which is good enough for me. I am not sure why it works.

The ideogram fence means that I have never had to consider getting violent or even compulsive with the local deer population. I have never considered buying a gun. Nor did I acquire a dog to keep the deer away. I have never needed to construct a high fence around any of the fruit trees as I would later do around the vegetable garden. Explaining why the ideogram works on the fruit trees and not on the vegetables seems mostly a matter of thinking like a deer. If I were a deer I could forgo a few plum leaves each spring if that idea were communicated to me. Of course no communication would sway me if, as a deer, I chanced up a winter garden filled to the brim with roots and greens.

In the process of recognizing this ideogram as a solution, I have discovered something important about doling out garden advise. Although the local deer display distinct preferences in their choice of browse, no general rule of thumb can be ascertained from this very local lesson. The ideogram fence *may* work for someone else. And then again it may not. Deer are not instinctoids, blank-eyed no-brainers possessed of non-personalities and generic taste buds. Nor do they exhibit any *predictable* inclination to linger near or far from the houses of human beings. The best "how to" advice I am willing to offer anyone is to recommend trying a ideogram fence around the base of any favored deer tree. It appears to work for me. However, no one can convince me that if I ripped out that well-scarred but productive prune-plum, replanted the exact same hole with another prune-plum, that the same fence strung around the new tree would repel the local deer as it did before. In other words, the map is not the territory.

Every tree and every deer has a distinct personality. People who build fences have distinct personalities. Even the fences, –real, symbolic, or wholly imagined–have distinct personalities. The relationship between all these beings and structures, each one of them bursting with personality, seems to exist beyond the reckonings of any logic. Scientists will never plumb the depths of this relationship through any wile of statistical analysis. Does it exist? Let's withhold judgement a moment.

This relationship motivates me to recommend successful strategies to other gardeners, but not tactics. In this case, the strategy is simple: do not treat natural predators as a manifestation of evil. Treat that deer as a discerning neighbor. Talk to your neighbor! Communicate: build a sign, an ideogram fence. But don't build a great wall of China unless you like running a prison camp for fruit trees. Plant all the trees you like and rest assured that the deer will be just as finicky in choosing the ones he or she likes. And another strategy: follow the tortoise's example. Plant two each of every fruit tree you like and then sit back and watch the deer. Watch the trees. In five years you'll know which ones the deer prefer. In eight years the trees will have grown too large for any deer to harm.

Only *five years* to run a fruit-growing experiment? Feel blessed when a hundred golden ripe peaches start ripening on a tree that is a mere four year old stripling, and takes up about the same amount of garden space as a picnic table. Feel blessed that it's not sequoia cones we're waiting for. That might take decades. Then again, if we're in a hurry, we should consider a hobby like sprinting instead.

There is another plum tree growing in my sentient garden. This is the ornamental blireana plum possessed of a penny-candy fragrance and striking bronzey leaves of a color seemingly appropriated from a coral reef. It grows off by itself at the very edge of the forest. I have observed over several years that, of all the trees in the larger extended landscape, my cat sharpens her claws only on this ten foot tall sapling. It seems that the cat actually goes quite a bit out of her way to visit that tree. I was recently surprised while visiting a friend. I was admiring the distinct coppery coloring of her own blireana plum when I noticed scratches along the length of the trunk. Was it possible? She soon informed me that *her* cat also prefers to scratch *his* claws on a blireana plum tree. Perhaps paradoxically, I have since talked to another neighbor whose own blireana plum was recently destroyed by a *deer*. Mine is completely deerproof.

What have I learned from my blireana plum during its tenancy along the deer path? Although my own particular plum has nothing to fear from the local deer, I would certainly think twice before

recommending that someone else plant an unprotected blireana plum on a deer path.

I feel certain that my own blireana plum tree has formed an alliance with the three or four deer who frequent this neighborhood. Is this conclusion mystical? Is it sentimental? Is it "merely anecdotal"? Or does it square with recent botanical evidence demonstrating that several tree species possess rudimentary communication skills? For instance, one species of rainforest tree is capable of signaling the presence of predators to other nearby members of the same species. The other trees alter their chemistry accordingly. But what is the effect of this alteration? Do beetles and sloths suddenly find the leaves inedible? Or is this rather an announcement, a kind of arboreal stop sign, an ideogram of impalatability? No one seems to know for sure. The predators aren't telling.

What we have to admit, however, is that this example lends a bit of credence to my own cockeyed hunch. I notice the plum tree while out on my garden tour and wonder if it is even more sentient than those chemistry-altering trees which, after all, can only discuss their sense of wellbeing among themselves. Does the bliriana plum with the scratched trunk communicate to the black-tailed doe with the crooked hindleg? Does it talk differently to the big buck? And what does it say to the cat? I notice that most of the scratch marks have healed during the past year, signifying that my cat has quit her own bliriana claw-sharpening predation. Did the tree have anything to do with it? Or is the cat responding to my own emoted annoyance over the scratch marks? Is the plum communicating a tree's own version of a fence ideogram directly to a predators? Maybe it communicates lots of other things as well to anyone able to hear it. Maybe I could hear it. Maybe you could too. I want to learn how to do that. I don't know where to begin. Do you?

So many 'maybes' also reveals why the sentient garden is found so seldom in books about gardening. We live in a culture that devalues the intuitive. As this diminishment refers specifically to garden literature—a subject composed of unequal parts science, craft, aesthetics, and mysticism—the result is a steady stream of books written about the science, the craft, and the aesthetics of gardening, and only a few books that set out to elucidate its mystical side.

The most famous of these is *The Secret Life of Plants* which is probably the most controversial, best-selling book about the vegetable kingdom published in the last fifty years. Paradoxically, *The Secret Life of Plants* is better understood as a history of various experiments in plant sentience viewed through the rationalist lens of scientific analysis. The book is overwhelmingly the product of two savvy science writers who spent much more time in libraries than in gardens. The result is a text that masterfully expands the envelope of scientific plausibility, a kind of new age botany text that carefully sidesteps any personal message of transcendence except through inferences to specific experiments. Yet there are almost no references to the experiential aspects so crucial to any gardener's relationship to the garden. Then again, the *Secret Life of Plants* was never intended to be a gardening book.

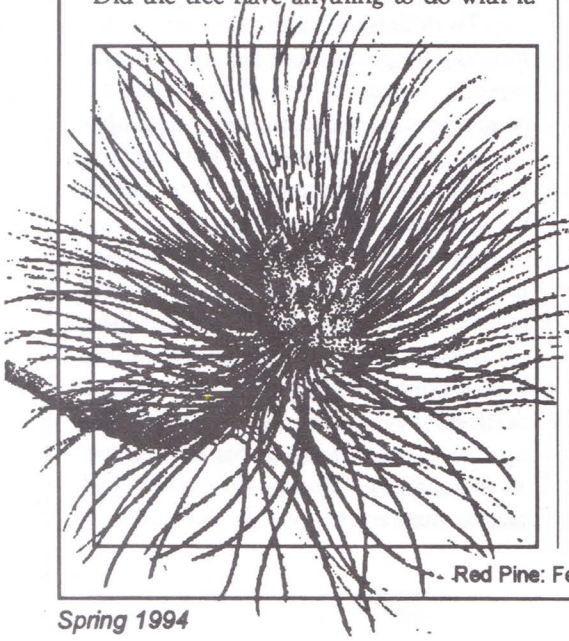
Why do garden writers avoid the subject of garden sentience? In fact, writers are as privy to our culture's devaluation of the intuitive as anybody else is. Most of them work hard to present themselves as experts of one stripe or another. As every potential expert soon discovers, dabbling in the intuitive for its own sake emphatically diminishes one's projected sense of authority. And authority is essential for anyone bent on offering practical advice. This may explain why magazines such as *Sunset*, *Fine Landscaping*, *Horticulture*, and *Country Living* are all remarkably silent about the sentient garden.

Not to say that garden writers haven't explored the intuitive side of their relationship to the garden. One of the best of them, Gertrude Jekyll, was an artist, who treated the garden as a loving and living canvas of color and texture; and in the process forever changed the tone of gardening away from a pretty view and towards a process of high participatory art with plants and space. Another English author, Vita Sackville-West, composed chatty prose that added a touch of the mystical to the greater discussion of gardens and gardeners. She was a sensualist, obviously enamoured by fragrance, who gushed about her roses as if they were special friends possessed of sensual genius. Luther Burbank, the great turn-of-the-century plant breeder often wrote about his plants as if they were peers collaborating with him to attain new forms and useful traits. The Japanese, Masanobu Fukuoka, wrote *The One-Straw Revolution*, promoting a sacred view of plants and soil as allies.

Were more gardeners to consider the myriad ways that plants respond to human beings, they might fall on these words on the subject of sentience offered by fabulist, Leo Lionni:

In our everyday garden grow the rosemary, juniper, ferns and plane trees, perfectly tangible and visible. For these plants that have an illusory relationship with us, which in no way alters their existentiality, we are merely an event, an accident, and our presence, which seems so solid, laden with gravity, is to them no more than a momentary void in motion through the air. Reality is a quality that belongs to them, and we can exercise no rights over it.

Were plants conscious, it would imply that they smell their own fragrance, see their own petal colors, hear the thunder of a neighboring tree as it falls to the whine of a chain saw. Were plants conscious, it might imply that they even *choose* their own fragrance, admire their own long silhouette reflected by the low winter sun. Consciousness also implies that plants possess a sense of place. Luther Burbank, who drew



Red Pine: Ferdinand Bauer, 1803

as closely to the plant world as any human ever has, insisted that his own plants existed primarily to accomodate place. They altered their traits to fit certain places and climate more quickly than genetics warranted.

Fast motion film animates flowers doing things our own sentience is incapable of perceiving. A trick of technology lends the plants a metabolism more like our own. I could watch flowers bloom this way for hours on end, quite willing to withhold my own unkinetic, unevolved, perception of plants if even for the brief time. But it is a trick of the human mind that causes these now fast-paced plants to seem more alive, and yes, more conscious than they appear in my own garden. I submit the obvious. Faster equals more consciousness because plants start to look just like animals acting out behaviors and reacting quickly to their environment. They seem nimble, talented. Bold. Even vain, whereas previously they only seemed beautiful in their stasis. Fast motion hints that plants do possess a temperament a bit like our own, merely acted out at a different tempo. Then again, it may all be a hoax, like the other hoax of humans observing a dolphin's frozen smile and believing these creatures are always happy go lucky.

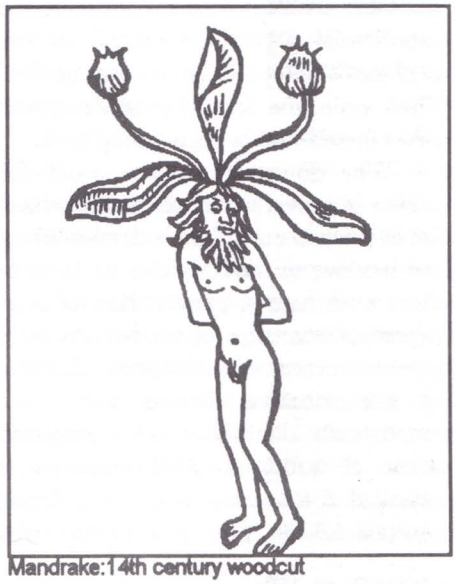
It may not be a hoax. Watching these racing, hugging, attacking, unfolding plants causes me to wonder yet another 'maybe'. Maybe it is our own scientific and patently extractive wiring that no longer lets us accept the idea of consciousness in other beings unless those beings *are already* like us. Some of us obviously won't accept the idea of seeing our own intellectual reflection in creatures like deer, octopuses or millipedes, not to mention plum trees. It does not serve the present regime. As environmental philosopher Michael Cohen has written, "how convenient for us to conceive mud, water, and stones, to be dead; to decide that other life has no consciousness, pain or equality. What an incredible alibi we have created to soothe our guilt of killing for profit." In such a manner, the sentient garden not only speaks to us about the limits of the rationalist worldview, but reveals its arrogance as well.

There is inherent ecological value to acknowledging the sentient garden. People who believe that plants are sentient, invariably treat them with greater respect than those who don't. If we all believed that plants are sentient–that the very garden itself is sentient–we might, for one example, be less willing to continue killing the soil with chemicals.

I'm out on a limb here. Many sober people refuse to grant consciousness to monkeys and dolphins who are like us in so many ways, and yet, here I am ascribing similar characteristic to plum trees. I even wonder if the vegetarians may have gotten their salient argument about consciousness all wrong because, in fact, plants are every bit as conscious as the animals are, albeit quieter and far less restless. Isn't that the reason a sizeable minority of gardeners talk to our plants? We do talk to them, you know. Even though many won't admit it.

To know the sentient garden, we must first learn how to look for it. For the benefit of those who see no point in even looking for this garden, it may serve us well to take a peak at history. Let us sift through some of the intellectual baggage we all bring to the task of gardening. Two perceptual ideas soon emerge from the heap: the first one is our culture's devaluation of the intuitive. The second one is anthropocentrism.

The devaluation of the intuitive occurs as an unfortunate result of science influencing our perceptions about reality. Science is based on measurement. Careful measurement establishes objectivity. As stated above, the quest for accurate measurement also mandates that a separation be strictly enforced between observer and observed. In field biology, when an observer interjects his or her own personal intuitions about the behavior of an observed animal or plant, the results are called anecdotal. Anecdote makes for weak science. Too much of it makes for no science at all.



Mandrake: 14th century woodcut

Our perceptions about the way the world works are deeply affected by scientific principles of analyzing measured data leading to objectivity. Our schools teach us to believe that non-measurable and intuitive experience does not offer as credible a model of reality as an experience gleaned from objective observation. One result is that scientists, as often as not turn a blind eye to phenomena that can not be reduced to measurement. Science class teaches the rest of us to subordinate the subjective–for example my hunch about the sentience of trees–because it doesn't "measure up".

The case has been made many times that the predominant scientific worldview itself is one cause of our steamrollering the world. We do so as a result of forgetting how to honor nature as an animate being. The devaluation of the intuitive causes us to suppress non-rationalist masculine feelings while it utterly disempowers the feminine. It also may cause some members of the rationalist establishment to throw up their hands in exasperation to read this proclaimed non-expert promoting a specific plum tree as a sentient being.

To understand anthropocentrism, we must dig deeper into our pile of perceptual baggage. Doing so, we discover that the contemporary relationship between garden and garden (and most of the rest of nature as well) originated during the latter half of the seventeenth century. This was a period of breathtaking perceptual transition. Europeans were starting to perceive of nature, not as the penitential leftovers from a divinely-inspired Eden, but as something new–a perfect, maintenance-free machine designed by God as the home for this bipedal creature made in his own image: the human race. Whereas the old view had taught that everything on earth was a

temptation, either a weapon or a trap in the epic struggle being waged between Heaven and Hell, the new view treated earth as an ergonomic vehicle. Everything in nature was made for human use.

Today we remain heirs of this human-centered notion of how the world works. We call the notion anthropocentrism. We call the ergonomic vehicle, spaceship earth.

Anthropocentrism has to be understood as an opinion of culture rather than as reality, itself. This opinion gained much momentum during the seventeenth century when Europeans wrestled to square the defunct heaven-bound perceptions of nature with the brand new earthbound ones. Just like us today, they too found themselves caught between mutually-exclusive perceptions of reality. In our case it is the old anthropocentric worldview versus the new biocentric worldview. In their case it was the old God-centered worldview versus the new anthropocentric worldview.

It fell upon the ministry of the time to justify the ways of the new God to the masses raised to the beat of a different God whose every act had been adjudged beyond human comprehension. To keep the new conceptual bubble intact, the learned men of the day churned out anthropocentric arguments to explain what must have seemed like ungodly flaws in the divine handiwork. Justifying the ways of God to Man became such a common activity that it soon got a name attached to it. Called *theodicy*, it was all the rage in the sermons of the European Enlightenment.

For instance, if this new rationalist God had constructed the world to accomodate humanity, then what possible reason could He have had to design the likes of smallpox, aphids, poison ivy, and sharks? Answering this fundamental question, the seventeenth century physician, George Cheyne wrote that the Creator made the horse's excrement smell sweet because he knew men would often be in its vicinity. Horse flies, vouched the Virginian William Byrd, had been created "that men should exercise their wits in order to guard against them." Even the lowly louse was indispensable, explained the Reverend William Kirby, because it provided "a powerful incentive to habits of cleanliness."

Over the centuries we have grown much more sophisticated in our ability to certify a human center to the machinery of nature. Still, the signs of this center can be witnessed just about everywhere we look. From the Amazon rainforest to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, our actions demonstrate that our civilization still endorses the basic belief that nature exists for human accomodation.

But what our actions tell, our thoughts often dispel. Like the men and women of the late seventeenth century, more and more of us are, today, starting to realize we are caught between two vastly different views of reality: the first one, human-centered or anthropocentric; the second, life-centered or biocentric. We are starting to sense that human beings are no longer at the center of the Earth's purpose. Our species is, rather, one integral aspect of the greater interdependent network of nature.

Our culture sits squarely between the two views. Most of us are unsure of its implications, misread the message of conflicting realities as an issue of jobs or resources. Some of us strike out in a different direction, we look to the trunks of plum trees or the taste buds of deer to find some visible sign of a biocentric network. Still others among us repudiate the very idea that anthropocentrism is just another worn-out *opinion* about reality, and not reality itself. All of us want to know: who's nature is this anyhow?

The struggle to answer this question affects every human institution. Rotting anthropocentric fences are being breached and replaced by new fencing. Yet every nation still asserts that its own fence, it's border, reserves its own resources for the citizens who reside inside the fence. But the new fence defines something fundamentally different than national access. The fight over North America's last great wilderness area, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, offers one example. The designers of the new fence don't want to keep out the Russians or the Japanese. They want to keep out the humans.

Most garden writers define gardening as the control of nature for aesthetic reasons. Control treats the plants and the beds as elements, like paint applied to a canvas. Control sets up a hierarchy, with gardeners poised at the top as lord and

Blackberries: William Rowe

master. This petit kingdom is created as an aesthetic triumph of human accomodation. Control reenacts a horticultural rendition of the prevailing cultural paradigm that separates human beings from nature—what writer Loren Eisley once referred to as "man's long loneliness". Control treats unruly nature as a dragon in our nouveau Eden intent on thwarting our every attempt to build a pocket paradise here on Earth. The dragon heaves up a never-ending artillery of weeds, insects, deer and unaccomodating weather our way. With the dragon so ready to pounce, we must never let up our guard.

Granted, dredging up such a fire and brimstone tone to describe the likes of dandelions and tent caterpillars exaggerates the way most gardeners actually deal their own controlling hand. But if the allusion seems overblown—and admittedly it is—then it is not without reason. It is far *less* overblown than the herbicides and pesticides we now wield in our daily combat with the dragon.

The control of nature for *aesthetic* reasons is troubling. Art critics are often clever at disguising their own personal biases as if they represent a universal truth about art. Control for aesthetic reasons. It suggests that a rose picked from a bush sprayed with pesticide is equally beautiful to its twin picked from an usprayed bush. A definition based on control assumes that we get more roses, and thus more beauty, by instituting a spray program, and consequently less roses, *less beauty*, when we

forgo spraying.

Misbegotten assumptions about beauty end up killing nature. The insects we seek to annihilate eventually become resistent to chemicals. As they adapt, our gardens lose a measure of their artificially sustained beauty. More powerful chemicals are applied. The insects adapt again. A spiral is set to spin. All across America individual gardeners set out to achieve the greenest lawn, the earliest tomato harvest, the largest roses, none of which could ever prosper without a control born of anthropocentrism. Too many dandelions growing in too many green lawns cause too many controlling gardeners to lay on too much herbicide, which ends up poisoning too many aquifers. By attempting to keep nature out, even on a small scale, each gardener adds his or her own small contribution to the poisoning of rivers, coastal waters, and soil. Given that conclusion, which do we continue to eradicate: dandelions or green lawns. In fact, it is our point of view that needs to change. And not the dandelions.

The biocentric view asks us to take a fresh look at our choices. It shows us that a beauty dependent upon excessive control is an arrogant beauty, even a vicious beauty. This perception of beauty keeps us from developing a more compliant, participatory relationship with place. For all these reasons, some biocentrists would argue that a human-centered aesthetic offers no beauty at all. At best, regard it is an outmoded beauty; a sense of beauty that is woefully naive about the challenges we face. In the end, God made horseflies, tea roses, green lawns, and yes, even our definition of aesthetics to rationalize anthropocentirsm. And now the world is on fire.

Without meaning to sound contradictory, every garden *also* exhibits the controlling hand of the gardener. A tidy garden demands that weeds get pulled, edges be defined, slugs get evicted. I state the obvious to make the crucial point that gardening is always going to be *somewhat* about taking control of nature in the pursuit of aesthetic perfection. If this were politics we might call the gardener an enlightened despot.

As the biocentric view suggests, the garden prospers when control is balanced by equal measures of humility and benevolence. A balance is struck. Control, servitude, imagination, pragmatism, respect, ecological conscience, compliance, and a certain measure of mysticism and altruism, all meld together to provide *nurturance*. Try to separate the various aspects into their constituent parts–grant any one of them the status of fundamental gardening definition–and one soon skews the entire process. Put them back together again in the service of the two-way street called nurturance, and we express the state of grace called gardening.

So we seem to have backed into a different definition of gardening. If the anthropocentric definition of gardening hinged on control, the biocentric one hinges on nurturance. With our revised definition now in hand, we are finally ready to wander down the garden path leading into the sentient garden. We now stand at the gate, take a peek through the slats of the ideogram fence, and give a sigh. Even as we sense the garden with fresh eyes, so we now notice that this garden also senses us.

Traditional people around the world have always asserted that the process of food gathering is an act of gift-giving from prey to person. It is said that the spirit of the gift increases even as the body of the gift is consumed. The predator who expresses gratitude for the gift receives more gifts. The predator who forgets to acknowledge the gift suffers dire consequences. Lest this relationship be misunderstood out of context, let it be known that in my own garden I am a predator of vegetables–the savage equal of any lionness in her own Serengetti garden.

Why is this important? Many aboriginal critics of contemporary culture believe that the environmental crisis is exacerbated by our own culture's neglect to honor the profound gift given *from* prey *to* predator. But how can we be expected to honor something we do not recognize? In fact, there can be no honoring until we first learn to acknowledge the sentience of other creatures. This is the reason that Inuit people in the High Arctic express real fear over the consequences of a dominant civilization bent on denying the value of ancient beliefs about animal and plant sentience. They believe that unless modern people are able to revitalize and redefine these same aboriginal perceptions about ecosystems existing as neighborhoods–and on a global scale–none of us has much hope of surviving. To the traditional person, animal and plant consciousness promotes an atmosphere of mutual esteem across species. It instills humility wherever the relationship is honored. No matter if this relationship is sung, danced, touched, carved, planted, worn, hugged, dug, or eaten, it is always honored.

Paradoxically, the positive effect this ancient spiritual repertoire *could* exert on our society (such as treating food as a conscious gift from plants and animals) may be more important to the welfare of the planet in this late twentieth century than our society's unswerving desire to debunk it wherever it rears its nonlinear head. One might rightly wonder about our own skewed sense of "progress" that replaces traditional values with cold hard data–no matter how much wisdom the original belief granted to its believers, their families, and their communities?

Honoring the gift between predator and prey–recognizing the sentience of all life–is not the same thing as glorifying the primitive. To regard them as a paraphrase of one another only trivializes what is a genuine modern longing to reconnect with the natural world. *Reconnecting* is what biocentrism is all about. And get with it. Biocentrism is rising fast as the reality of our children's generation.

In that sense, my plum anecdotes offer a kind of ecological *myth* (like the well known case of the 100th monkey) whose value–as with most myths–sometimes offers more to a person, than its debunking ever could. I *wish* to believe in this idea of negotiated relations between human and nature, because it enhances my life. Thus I continually find myself promoting its expression, even if my logical education constantly reminds me I may have my head screwed on backwards. No matter; this belief makes more sense to me then the depiction of nature as a vat full of names, categories, and resources.

Nor am I unaware of the fact that by exalting plum trees I may be guilty of grabbing at the same proverbial straws as

William Kirby who exalted the lowly louse in a parallel attempt to explain his own new worldview to denizens of the old. Yet the more I face up to these very personal biases, the more I discover that the relationship between myself and plum trees and deer is just as much about truth as it is about ethics, or simple faith, or even the postmodern philosophy that depicts views of reality as personal preferences.

There is an old saying: if you look too hard, paradise disappears. If so, then there is a risk to scrutinizing the sentient garden too intensively. Yet there are still important questions waiting to be answered. For instance, how *do* I explain the plum trees keeping the deer at bay?

Unfortunately, it is here that my reasoning turns most recondite. I have no clear answer, although, inscrutably, that is not quite the same thing as admitting I do not know. What I did was visualize an unspoken (and mostly subconscious) wish to have the trees prosper. Sounds innocuous enough. Regard it as a simple gardener's prayer mumbled directly to the sentient garden. But this is no hocus-pocus, I offer no burnt offerings to the god of this garden, don no feathers, bend no elbows to the four directions. Nor do I possess any hidden agenda of promoting myself as the next generation of consciousness athlete. Or perhaps I make too much of events that can not even be properly verified. The scientific method would beg me to take notes for another year; and then again the year after that. Not a bad idea.

Cooperating plum trees is one thing. But claiming a unified sentience for the entire garden seems quite another. If what I contend is true, then at what point in the process of constructing a garden from scratch, does this bold leap to sentience presumably occur? Is it sudden? Gradual? And to what extent is the mind of the gardener tangled up in the process? Is it just gardens that are loved intensely, sweated over profusely, or admired roundly that gain consciousness?

In fact, all such questions remind me of Baron von Frankenstein sewing body parts together, giving them a jolt of electricity, and then forever agonizing how to regain control over a creation who had started making real demands on his peace of mind. This entire line of thought leads nowhere because it presupposes that we sentient gardeners promote a robotic (herbotic?) garden—some kind of naive pop mysticism for the horticultural set.

This is not a case of listening to birds sing and hearing trees talk. Permit me to swap the word *garden* for *art*, below, and thus paraphrase the author, Ken Wilbur, as he paraphrases Schopenhauer to express the same idea this way:

Bad gardens copy, good gardens create, great gardens transcend. What all great gardens have in common are their ability to pull the sensitive viewer out of him or herself and into the garden, so completely that the separate self-sense disappears entirely, and at least for a brief moment one is ushered into a nondual and timeless awareness. A great garden, in other words, is mystical no matter what its actual content.

Or regard another image taken from Keith Thomas' Man and the Natural World, that earlier gave us sweet-smelling horse manure and instructive lice:

One of the most treasured memories of an old lady friend of mine, recently deceased, was of her visits, some sixty years or more ago, to a great countryhouse...and of her host, who was then old, the head of an ancient and distinguished family, and of his reverential feeling for his old trees. His greatest pleasure was to sit out of doors of an evening in sight of the grand old trees in his park, and before going in he walked round to visit them, one by one, and resting his hand on the bark he would whisper good night. He was convinced, he confided to his young guest, who often accompanied him in these evening walks, that they had intelligent souls and knew and encouraged his devotion.

An old man wanders his garden a hundred years ago. Chats up the trees. Charms a young friend who, herself, has recently died of old age. The image shows that the sentient garden transcends any inclination to do good deeds such as garden organically. Rather, the sentient garden is a *charmed* garden. All the parts—including the human part—interpenetrate to create a sense of place. The gardener who acquires such a sense catches a fleeting glimpse of the divine mystery of life.

—Jim Nollman

Workshop

We at IC have always placed the activity of whalewatching in the grey area between connecting with nature and harassing animals. Certainly its better than killing whales for food. Certainly its better than watching orcas with floppy dorsal fins jump through hoops in oceanariums. Granted, some whale-watching operators obviously display a sensitivity to the whale's space and their special acoustic needs. But too many operators follow the whales all day long with motors throbbing and diesel fuel spewing. The whales get no opportunity to define either the theatre or the method of interaction.

Our own major complaint with whalewatching is perceptual. The activity seems much too visually oriented—plain and simple sightseeing. And running off a few rolls of film and pointing at whale bodies for a couple of hours has become the main way late 20th century humans relate to cetaceans. It's another roadside attraction; whales today, Yosemite Valley tomorrow.

We at IC have recently come up with an alternative plan. We refer to it as transcendental whalewatching. Think of it as a workshop in connecting with nature, with the whale's playing the part of nature's own ambassadors. If you want to join up, it takes a week's committment.

Our group should *see* whales everyday. However, our perceptual focus will be *listening* to whales communicate among themselves. At least once a day we will also attempt to communicate to the whales through music-making. If the whales like what we do, they'll swim in close. If they do that on a regular basis, we may get a chance to swim with them.

The species is the pilot whale—big black, blunt-nosed members of the dolphin tribe. The time and place is the Canary islands next December before Christmas. The boat is an eighty foot ketch named Kairos. It accomodates 15 guests. Jim Nollman from IC will lead the workshop. The price hasn't been set. If you want to get on the list, write Martina, c/o Kairos, Rosa Luxemburg str. 39,D-O-1820, Belzig, Germany.

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